



Negotiating Gender through Pilgrimage: A Multi-Dimensional Perspective on the Shri Amarnath Yatra

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Abstract

Patriarchy has managed to marginalize every other experience than the male principal. With strong foundations in gender difference almost all its socio- political institutions especially Family, marriage, academy, law, literature and religion stipulated the male as the natural, the original and the norm, there by legitimatizing exploitation, suppression and subjugation of the female gender. Although all religious practices, rituals and liturgies align with the androcentric thought, but pilgrimages have had been used as a strategic devices to trample patriarchal legacy. since antiquity through Greek , Christian and Islamic traditions pilgrimages have offered viable channels of resistance to defy conventional gender norms. Like other sacred religious journeys, pilgrimage to Holy Amarnath Cave offers a perfect example of the emancipatory space for the assertion and resilience of female agency . Since yatra from its inception to its conclusion involves strict adherence to certain rituals and practices that are not only gender neutral but also contradictory to the established notions of " gender performativity " as articulated by Judith Butler. Therefore this paper makes an attempt to analyse the ways through which the holy pilgrimage offers a realistic spectacle of gender subversion. Through a feminist theoretical background the paper attempts to fathom out the strategic ways and actions that promote gender inclusivity and foster female bonding. This paper examines the Holy Amarnath Yatra as an emancipatory site that facilitates the assertion of female agency and the renegotiation of gendered subjectivities. It argues that the ritual practices governing the pilgrimage, from its commencement to its completion, create a shared devotional space in which prescribed gender roles are temporarily suspended or reconfigured. In doing so, the yatra offers a compelling context for interrogating Judith Butler's concept of gender performativity and exploring how religious

practice can generate possibilities for gender subversion rather than merely reproduce patriarchal norms. Drawing on feminist theoretical frameworks, the paper analyses the embodied experiences and ritual participation of women pilgrims to demonstrate how the Amarnath pilgrimage fosters gender inclusivity, resilience, and collective female solidarity. It contends that the pilgrimage functions not only as a spiritual undertaking but also as a transformative social arena in which women negotiate autonomy, visibility, and belonging within a traditionally male-dominated religious landscape. By foregrounding the intersection of pilgrimage, ritual, and gender, the study contributes to broader debates on religion, embodiment, and feminist resistance in South Asia.

Patriarchy has managed to marginalize every experience other than the male principle. With strong foundations in gender difference, almost all its socio-political institutions, especially the family, marriage, academia, law, literature, and religion, have stipulated the male as the natural, the original, and the norm, thereby legitimizing the exploitation, suppression, and subjugation of the female gender. As a consequence, through the process of social conditioning carried out in these social institutions, women learn to appropriate themselves to different roles, identities, and behavioural attitudes akin to their specific gender. These gender-specific traits perpetuate, across socio-historical times, hierarchical binaries. This hierarchy privileges the masculine as the locus of all physical, psychological, and geographical domains, while confining women to the domestic and private spheres.

However, prior to the birth of patriarchy, religion was considered the prime domain of the female. Describing the main focus of religion during the Neolithic Age, James Mellaart writes, "The conservation of life in all its forms, its propagation, and the mysteries of its rites connected with life and death, birth and resurrection were evidently part of her sphere rather than that of man."

Although, under the colossal impact of patriarchy, most religious practices, rituals, and liturgies became aligned with androcentric thought, pilgrimages have been used as strategic devices by the female race to trample the patriarchal legacy. Since antiquity, through Greek, Christian, Islamic, and Hindu traditions,

pilgrimages have offered viable channels of resistance to defy conventional gender norms.

Carried out under strong conviction, sanctity, fervour, and aura, pilgrimages have offered structural and operational opportunities to bridge, on a larger scale, the ethnic, racial, and gendered divide. While examining the historical context, Geoffrey Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* remains a testament to the fact that religious voyages have created liminal spaces capable of unsettling gender distinctions, recognising female agency, and strengthening the counter-narrative in early Christian times. Islamic feminists like Fatima Mernissi, Amina Wadud, and Ziba Mir-Hosseini have been instrumental in defending pilgrimage spaces as radical sites of resistance and empowerment for women. Similarly, Hindu philosophy and religion have been a source of inspiration and power for social transformation.

In her provocative essay, *Speaking of Faith: Cross-Cultural Perspectives on Women, Religion and Social Change*, Devaki Jain sums up the strategic significance of religion in a woman's life. She writes: "Religion is a source of power for women, giving them a sense of self and a space for leadership... it provides a platform where women are not just followers, but active creators of community and social change."

While analysing Victor Turner's idea of "liminality," Graham St. John analyses the ways in which religious practices, rites, and rituals create spaces where human beings perceive an ambiguous duality regarding their identities. Describing this state of a person as a "liminal person," Victor Turner states in his book, *The*

Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure, that liminal persons are "neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial" (Turner, 1969).

It is in this context that the Yatra (pilgrimage) to the holy shrine of Shri Amarnath Ji embodies paramount symbolic significance across distinct variables. Located in the peripheral part of the country, the yatra draws the en masse participation of men, women, and other genders, cutting across varied cultural, linguistic, ethnic, and racial barriers. From the beginning, through strict adherence to structural procedures and spiritual rites, the yatra observes a complete deconstruction of patriarchal discourse. Against the androcentric belief that circumscribes women within the house for being physically fragile, intellectually passive, psychologically vulnerable, and biologically lacking, women pilgrims engage in an extraordinary act of transgression.

While leaving their homes, all devotees, including women and LGBTQ members, move across roads, streets, registration centres, and vehicles, getting caught up in liminal spaces that allow them to step out of their gendered identities, social labels, and community status.

Their endurance, perseverance, and struggles while marching neck to neck with their male counterparts along the rough terrain of the mountain peaks constitute a vivid act of gender subversion. In her theoretical concept of *Gender Trouble*, Butler argues that gender is "performative," an act that one does repeatedly through actions, behaviours, gestures, and performances. The Holy Yatra, with its prescribed religious trajectory and practices, enables women to undergo the same performance as their male counterparts, thereby attempting what Butler calls "counter-performativity." During the whole journey, women display a spectacle that dramatizes a common human spirit rather than a gendered self.

In addition, the physical landscape surrounding the holy shrine, with its steep peaks, harsh weather, and challenging paths, necessitates an unconventional dress code for the devotees. This adoption of an alternative attire by women

results in what Virginia Woolf calls the "subversion of enclotted cognition." Devotees, especially women from orthodox families who remain busy with daily household chores while remaining submerged within the "ghoonghat," witness the dismantling of gendered segregation and face masking.

Thus, clad in an outfit that destabilizes gender markers, the attire, with its religious sanctity, strips away hierarchical binaries besides shielding women from the colossal impact of the "disempowering effect of the male gaze."

Thus, the Amarnath pilgrimage creates an egalitarian environment where the acoustic sounds of "Bum Bum Bhole" and "Har Har Mahadev" inspire in all devotees an intense feeling of togetherness, belongingness, and equality. It is not only that men and women enter into collective sharing, but the rough terrain, comfort tents, and langars also offer ample opportunities for women to connect with one another. Helping one another while climbing peaks, sharing personal anecdotes, and lending strength and support, the Yatra helps develop what Adrienne Rich calls "woman-to-woman bonding."

Thus it becomes evident that Amarnath Yatra offers a substantive social paradigm for women to negotiate their gendered identities. With all its structural and operational strategies a space gets created throughout the journey that necessitates blurring of various gender markers. All the social norms, customs, mores and patterns that provide strong foundations to gender difference get surpassed while moving from the 'closet' to the inner portions of the cave. Although Turner is of the opinion that ambiguous phase in one's identity during this stage is transitory, but it becomes evident that gendered identity is not only negotiated but gets permanently transformed as envisaged by Anzaldua Gloria'.

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